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**‘With all my heart’: Mature students’ emotions while doing a  
research-based PhD**

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**Abstract**

With this paper, the author has two main objectives: (i) to reflect on the role of emotions regarding the process of PhD research and supervision, and (ii) to identify the emotions mature students experience through their engagement in a research-based PhD, considering their own voices gathered through an in-depth focus group. The pertinence of this subject is grounded on two main reasons. On the one hand, a hot reality may be verified in different parts of the globe: mature students engaging in research-based PhDs. On the other hand, small research has been addressing the role of emotions in the supervisory and research processes, even though this experience has been considered, for many PhD students, an intense and demanding ‘roller coaster’.

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**1. Introduction**

The international agenda on higher education reveals a growing concern with the extension and impact of research at postgraduate level, as well as an increasing number and a greater diversity of students enrolling in postgraduate studies in general, and in doctoral programmes in particular (Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004). Therefore, an in-depth analysis is essential to understand the experiences different types of students have while pursuing a research-based PhD, and to stimulate meta-reflections on the way diverse students experience their learning process through research. This effort will allow us (i) to identify successful experiences and, at the same time, difficulties, with the aim of improving practice and the overall context, and (ii) to make more explicit how a human being can go beyond his/her personal boundaries, and how his/her learning happens, from a personal perspective, which is frequently embedded in strong emotional experiences. This latter aspect is the main topic of this paper.

**2. Emotions and the doctorate**

It is interesting to note that there is little literature regarding the role of emotions in the processes of doctoral research and supervision. In this case, the author approaches this issue from a broader perspective, considering PhD research and supervision, and not only in terms of mature students’ experiences regarding those processes. There are, in fact, some relevant studies that must be pointed out, since they demonstrate consensual perspectives

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(Cotterall, 2013; Herman, 2010; McLaughlin, 2003; Widdowfield, 2000). These scholars consider that emotional and cognitive processes are deeply embedded in the learning and research processes, which inevitably overlap each other. In the words of McLaughlin (2003): “(...) *emotion and thinking are inextricably linked in the research process*” (p.65). Therefore, “(...) *more attention needs to be given to the importance of the role of emotion in understanding and developing the capacities for reflection which facilitate personal, professional and ultimately systems change*” (McLaughlin, 2003, p.66). Following a similar idea, a particular study from Morrison-Saunders and colleagues (2010) emphasise that, from doctoral students’ perspective, the entire PhD process is an authentic ‘roller coaster’.

Additionally, there are studies that demonstrate that emotional and motivational issues doctoral students experience along the supervisory and research processes are factors that may determine their persistence and completion of the PhD degree, on the one hand, and their failure or dropout, on the other (Cotterall, 2013; Jairam & Kahl, 2012). In a recent study, Jairam and Kahl (2012) reinforce that doctoral students expect emotional and professional support from their supervisors – not only the ‘narrow’ academic/scientific support only related to research. This goes in line with the responsibilities and the role doctoral supervisors should engage in and assume when necessary: the role of a mentor (Manathunga, 2007; Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004). However, as Herman (2010) stresses: “*doctoral studies still tend to emphasise the rational and technical competencies of producing research and neglect the emotional aspects of doctoral learning*” (p.283). Though it seems there usually is a separation from rational and cognitive aspects of learning/research and the emotional part of a human being, it is undeniable that learning and research are intense processes that also ask from an intense personal involvement and transformation from which emotions cannot be disaggregated.

### **3. Mature students’ characteristics and the pursuit of a doctorate**

In a previous study, the author has already reviewed non-traditional adult students’ characteristics entering higher education at undergraduate level, and reflected on possible implications for higher education institutions (Baptista, 2011). Considering those are characteristics that can be extended to mature students deeply and intrinsically involved with their formal (and even informal) learning at several levels, it is the author’s intention to draw attention, in this paper, to studies that focus on features of mature students who are pursuing a doctorate. Although little literature has been addressing this issue, there are emerging inter-connected contributions that must be taken into account. Frequently, these studies consider that mature students follow professional doctorates as part-time doctoral students. On the contrary, the preliminary study we present in the next section highlights the experience of both full-time and part-time students but engaged in a research-based PhD - usually named ‘traditional doctorate’.

Several authors (Evans, 2007; Hickey, 2007; Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2009) emphasise that, at the same time most mature students have already had a previous research experience (namely a Master degree), they usually bring their own research interests into the doctorate: the research topic commonly emerges from the adult’s practice or professional experience. Consequently, many adults ‘struggle’ with a dual identity: they may be researchers and workers in the same professional context and that kind of articulation may not be considered very positive among their colleagues and employers. Accordingly, in the learning process it is impossible to separate prior experiences, and their intrinsic values: everything will influence mature students’ learning process in general, meaning making, knowledge (re)creation and other experiences’ apprehension – namely when carrying out a research project.

Following a similar perspective, Malfroy (2005) and Polson (2003) point out that mature students may feel intimidated by the academic environment, and their role as a ‘student’, since they already have a different set of competences and knowledge that may not be very well understood by senior academics. Consequently, their socialisation is quite different from their younger counterparts, also because mature students are often off-campus.

Other authors (Brus, 2006; Evans, 2006; Malfroy, 2005; Polson, 2003) add that mature students may experience difficulties in balancing their research and work duties with their personal lives and responsibilities as well as in meeting their own expectations. Therefore, mature students need to demonstrate a high ability to prioritise, searching alternatives to be able to manage different responsibilities without feeling guilty and/or anxious.

In addition to generating (re)new(ed) knowledge, but mainly provoking some kind of change and improvement in

the workplace, Shacham and Od-Cohen (2009) highlight that, for mature students, the PhD may be considered the fulfilment of a dream and a personal aspiration, as well as an opportunity to grow, to gain high-level order competences and in-depth knowledge, to develop ideas as well as to advance in their own career.

#### 4. Methodology

This is a qualitative study that utilised an exploratory focus group in order to explore in-depth conceptions of adult students doing a doctorate in the field of Education, and at the same time analyse the coherence and proximities of their opinions. Although the focus group only involved 4 students, an individualistic approach to the data was emphasised to capture the actual, grounded experience of the group as a whole as well as each individual contribution. The main objective of the study was to understand how adult students perceive their learning through their involvement in an intense journey: a research-based doctorate. To achieve this goal, a descriptive and reflective perspective regarding the results was adopted. In this paper in particular, the objective is to identify the emotions mature students experience through their engagement in a research-based PhD.

The strategy of data collection adopted was a focus group, because it stimulates interaction, discussion, self and meta-reflection among the participants. Due to "*the dynamic nature of the process*" (Greenbaum, 2000, p.13), this exploratory study has benefited from this qualitative research technique, since it had enabled and encouraged participants to be actively involved and 'think conceptually' (Greenbaum, 2000). It was followed a semi-structured focus group: at the same time there were certain thematic frontiers, there was also a space for diversity, and flexibility. The 4 mature students have opened themselves to each other and to the discussion, sharing similar perspectives. This fact highlights that their experiences crossed and are tuned, reinforcing the conclusions we describe in the next section.

A very small group constituted with 4 students was run, since the author wanted to provoke an intense and open discussion. Moreover, it was assured that a comfortable context for the participants to share their experiences, conceptions, values and beliefs was established. The focus group was constituted by 3 males and 1 female. All of them have had a previous experience of research when doing their research-based master degrees. Also, all of them are teachers: 3 are teachers of basic and secondary education, and 1 is a teacher at a higher education institution. The 4 doctoral students are working full-time while doing the doctorate and thus are financially independent. Additionally, all of them are married and have children. While 2 students are enrolled in the doctorate full-time, the other 2 are enrolled part-time. They all are of the same edition of a Doctoral Programme: these 4 students started their doctoral path at the same time and at the moment of the focus group they were approximately in the middle of the process.

#### 5. Findings: Making sense of emotions

After informed consent and all participants' approval, the discussion was audio taped and then fully transcribed. Thereafter, the transcripts were sent by e-mail to the participants so they could validate them. After this procedure, we carried a thorough content analysis, trying to find semantic patterns in the data. We passed through different but interactive phases in the content analysis' process in order to reach coherent semantic patterns. Thus, the interactive and reflective process was constituted by: analysing -> systematising -> reviewing -> analysing again to test if it was coherent. Therefore, the semantic themes we will focus on have emerged from the contextual interpretation of the data.

##### 5.1. Emotional intelligence

All 4 participants consider that, because their experiences at personal, social, academic and professional levels, they have a kind of emotional intelligence that younger students normally do not possess. What they call 'emotional intelligence' has to do with aspects such as: (i) knowing how to deal with anxiety, stress and other contradictory and more negative feelings that one may experience while being engaged in a doctoral research; (ii) taking advantage of

opportunities and experiences (even negative ones) to learn (specifically: learning from mistakes); and (iii) demonstrating a high degree of adaptability and of dealing with others. This perspective may thus reveal that, along with their own personal path through the doctoral process, they may have been feeling intense emotional experiences, and recognise their emotional intelligence as an important competence to overcome certain moments. Additionally, this emotional intelligence is related to the idea of freedom: they are not afraid of making mistakes, because it is an intrinsic characteristic of human beings. Also, the way they deal with their own mistakes is quite different from younger students. One student states: *“We are freer to make our own choices. (...) / If we do not want to conclude, we leave without any kind of anxiety and with a quiet mind”*.

### 5.2. Personal/Academic/Professional Conflict

In terms of their academic and professional self-awareness, they mention a sense of dual identity: at that moment they consider themselves teachers (in basic and secondary education, as well as in higher education) and researchers (particularly involved in a systematic process of knowledge (re)construction within the doctorate, following a specific research methodology, with definite purposes). However, mainly those working in basic and secondary schools highlight that, throughout the professional career, they have always tried to possess a ‘researcher attitude’:

*“(...) Sometimes when I prepare and give lessons I confront myself with some complex situations (in terms of knowledge, on the one hand, and of teaching practice, on the other). So I have to search for alternatives and solve a problem. I believe we may be/ are researchers, although we do not follow the systematic methodological process. But we have other characteristics: to be concerned, to keep ourselves updated, to continue searching for novel things, to permanently reflect about the practice before, during and after classes”*.

Following the previous idea, one student mentions a personal conflict, because of the co-existence of those roles: *“I believe this is creating a binary situation”*. This shows that this student has been really permeable to the doctorate: she was open to the research and learning process and, as such, it changed her at some point, definitely provoking changes in her own perceptions and way of contemplating herself. This demonstrates how intimate and overwhelming a learning process through research may be, particularly to those who fully open themselves to newness and discovery, challenging their own personal boundaries. However, occasionally: *“These are two parallel paths (...) Sometimes it is a little bit hard to manage all this”*.

### 5.3. Personal fulfilment and enrichment, and more self-confidence

The 4 students highlighted the doctoral experience as extremely enriching, particularly giving them a sense of personal fulfilment. In fact, for one student in particular, this accomplishment acquires a sense of renewed self-confidence: *“I am used to reflect on my personal practice and on my professional path. (...) Despite my age, I continue to demonstrate a high spirit to other subjects [than professional practice]. I feel I am still alive”*.

In terms of the scientific domain, they consider they have learnt a lot: there were more complex and difficult concepts/topics which they would never study if they were not in a doctorate. Thus, the doctorate allowed them to face these challenges and difficulties, and simultaneously face their own fears in relation to preconceptions on some topics which they thought they would never be capable of cognitively apprehending: *“I have never dominated a certain part, which I have always found very complex (...) but I ‘fought’ with that author... And I am glad I did it”*.

Also, they have overcome some moments of *“academic solitude”*, particularly due to the lack of prompt and in-depth feedback from their supervisors. They have demonstrated a resilient and self-regulated attitude.

### 5.4. Friendship bonds

At another level, these students emphasise the importance of a group of colleagues with whom they share friendship bonds, which have begun in the doctoral programme. This is not only an academic connection, since there are contributions, reflections and discussions regarding the research they all enrol with, but also an emotional connection and support, since all are living the same process and there is mutual understanding and support. This

kind of synergy is very important, particularly in terms of the emotional links that are established, which are important to overcome difficulties that may not be totally understood by members of the family who are not involved in the doctorate. The process of mutual support and sharing opinions within a closer group of colleagues has been essential for these students.

### 5.5. Demystification of the difficulty of the PhD process

To conclude, at the same time they all give a huge importance to the doctorate, it is also interesting to note that, because intrinsically experiencing a doctoral process, they have had the opportunity to demystify the process and to weight its importance with other aspects of their own reality and life: *“For me it was essential to understand that it is important to have the doctorate, but this is not everything in life”*.

## 6. Final considerations

From mature students' perspectives, it can be concluded that learning through research at a doctoral level is an in-depth, intense, emotional and reflective process that requires, among other things: (i) a cognitive apprehension of new concepts, (ii) observing concepts/objects from different perspectives, (iii) a profound cognitive, emotional and social relationship with a chosen research object, with oneself and with others, and (iv) a personal discovery namely at an emotional level. Therefore, more in-depth discussions and studies are needed, particularly in what regards the supervisory relationship established between a mature supervisor and a mature student, and the emotional 'roller coaster' both may/will experience.

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